

Helping Hospitals in the Delta

A financially stable hospital is crucial to a community's health, as well as its economy--especially in rural areas. Hospitals not only provide residents with essential health care services, they also are a major employer and help fuel the local economy.

Unfortunately, many small rural hospitals are struggling to stay afloat in the face of:

- 1) Severe workforce shortages;
- 2) Geographic isolation;
- 3) Inadequate reimbursement;
- 4) Increasing costs;
- 5) Limited access to capital;
- 6) New regulatory requirements; and
- 7) Growing numbers of underinsured patients.

These challenges are particularly acute in the Mississippi River Delta region where poverty and unemployment lead to financial losses in many small hospitals.

To help Delta hospitals meet those challenges, the RHPI Project is in its fourth year of a contract with the Health Resources and Services Administration's Office of Rural Health Policy within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

According to the RHPI Senior Advisor, Terry Hill, hospitals must take a comprehensive approach to improvement. "You cannot separate quality of service from financial viability from workforce issues. They are all inter-related," he said. "A crisis in any of these areas can affect clinical quality. RHPI offers a full array of assistance without creating a dependency relationship."



Field Memorial Community Hospital, in Centerville, Mississippi, is one of the participating hospitals.



More than 100 hospitals in the eight-state region are eligible for assistance under RHPI.

Focused Consultation

Assistance includes anything from addressing information system needs to conducting a comprehensive analysis and consultation on the hospital's entire operations. The exact nature of the assistance is worked out with the hospital to make sure that the help needed is the help delivered.

No matter what the focus, the emphasis is on improving the hospital's performance and long-term financial success.

Strategic planning assistance gave the board of Fulton County Hospital, a 50-year-old Hill-Burton facility in Salem, Arkansas, a much clearer picture of its situation and options. As hospital administrator Franklin Wise puts it, "This is going to be the bedrock upon which we build our plans. It's where we start our future."

RHPI helped Hamilton Memorial District, in McLeansboro, Illinois, shift its focus from mere cost containment to total revenue enhancement. As a result, the hospital is considering adding physical therapy services, marketing its laboratory services to other providers, hiring another general surgeon, and becoming a Critical Access Hospital.

Because of its participation in the program, Ashley County Medical Center, in Crossett, Arkansas, is revising the way it staffs its inpatient service by hiring "hospitalists," doctors that admit and care for patients, to increase inpatient care and enhance revenues.

The Rural Hospital Performance Improvement Project (RHPI):

- Provides on-site technical assistance to hospitals in the Delta region to improve their financial, clinical and operational performance.
- Develops business tools, processes and databases to help hospitals help themselves.
- Helps build capacity within State Offices of Rural Health and hospital associations in the region to provide ongoing assistance.



Fulton County Hospital, in Salem, Arkansas, is building its future on strategic planning assistance from RHPI.

For more information, see
<http://deltarhpi.ruralhealth.hrsa.gov>
Or contact Terry Hill at
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The RHPI Project is administered by Mountain States Group in partnership with the Rural Health Resource Center. Funding is provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the Health Resources and Services Administration's Office of Rural Health Policy.

Great Need, Great Potential

Barbara Dallas at the Illinois Hospital Association sums up the program's benefits, "RHPI has given hospitals the financial and operational assessment tools that they otherwise would not have had."

Most of the eligible hospitals (50 or fewer staffed beds, located in the Delta) are interested in participating in the Rural Hospital Performance Improvement Project. The need and potential, therefore, to expand the program and its benefits to hospitals and communities in the Delta is great.

L.J. Pecot, CEO of Jackson Parish Hospital in Jonesboro, Louisiana, puts it this way, "I recommend RHPI to everybody, even if you think you're doing everything right."



Jackson Parish Hospital in Jonesboro, Louisiana, learned not only what was wrong, but how to fix the problems.



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Rural Hospital Performance Improvement (RHPI) Project



The Mississippi River Delta

